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Abstract: The few academic studies which look at the development and goals of the Catholic youth centres known as oratori tend to privilege the oratorio maschile over its all-girl counterpart. This article aims to bring to light the experience of the oratorio femminile as an important moment of socialization and growth for girls, teenagers and young women in the post-World War II years. It first provides a brief introduction regarding the origins and development of the oratory in Italy. Then, drawing on oral sources and archival material, it delineates the characteristics of the all-girl oratory experience, underlining the significance of this forgotten moment of Italian women's cultural history.

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The *Oratorio Femminile*: Young Women's Socialization and Growth in Postwar Italy¹

DANIELA CAVALLARO

There is a certain mystique surrounding the *oratorio* experience lived by young Italian men in the 1950s and 1960s. From the many sportsmen who began kicking the football around church yards under the supervision of the local pastor, to the many actors and singers who made their debut on the parish stage, the Catholic youth centers known as *oratori* are considered places which gave young men the opportunity to cultivate their talent for sports and the performing arts.² While few academic studies have looked at the development and goals of Italian oratories, they have tended to privilege the *oratorio maschile* over its all-girl counterpart.³ Other studies claim that the history of *oratori femminili* is “meno documentata” (less documented) and, as such, harder to reconstruct.⁴ Thus, it would appear that the all-girl experience of the oratory has, for the most part, been considered second-class, or ‘di serie B’.⁵

While widely ignored by the scholarly world, however, all-girl oratories have not been forgotten by the many girls and young women who attended them. In recent years, I have had the opportunity to interview several women about their involvement in the Catholic oratory in the years between 1946 and the late 1950s.⁶ They reported that the oratory gave them the

¹ Quotes in this article have been translated into English by Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar, assistant editor at *gender/sexuality/italy*.

² Giacinto Facchetti, celebrated captain of the Inter and of the Italian national soccer teams, for example, started playing in the Oratorio Sant’Agostino in his native Treviglio (Bergamo). On soccer at the oratory in the postwar years, see also Fabien Archambault, “Il calcio e l’oratorio: Football, Catholic Movement and Politics in Italian Post-War Society, 1944-1960,” *Historical Social Research* 31, no. 1 (2006): 134-150.

Among the singers, performers and personalities of the arts world who attended Salesian oratories, Michele Novelli lists Pippo Baudo, Turi Ferro, Adriano Celentano, Federico Fellini, Pietro Garinei and Sandro Giovannini. Michele Novelli, “Educare i giovani attraverso la formula del ‘Teatrino’ di Don Bosco – ‘Il Teatro dei giovani’ nel secondo dopoguerra,” in *Salesiani di Don Bosco in Italia. 150 anni di educazione*, edited by Francesco Motto (Roma: LAS 2011), 379.

³ See Giorgio Vecchio, “Gli oratori milanesi negli anni della ricostruzione: tradizione e novità,” *Bollettino dell’Archivio per la Storia del Movimento Sociale Cattolico in Italia* 3 (1994): 390-430; Ilaria Macconi, “La parrocchia negli anni cinquanta,” *Storia in Lombardia* 1-2 (1995): 411-430; Giovanni Gregorini, “Gli oratori,” in *A servizio del vangelo. Il cammino storico dell’evangelizzazione a Brescia*, edited by Mario Taccolini (Brescia: La Scuola, 2005), 293- 314; Angelo Manfredi, “Oratori e la Chiesa in Italia,” *Dizionario Storico Tematico La Chiesa in Italia*, Volume II - Dopo l’Unità Nazionale (Roma: Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa, 2015). Web. Accessed 28 November 2015. <http://www.storiadellachiesa.it/glossary/oratori-e-la-chiesa-in-italia>. In particular Luciano Caimi, even though recognising the opportunities that all-girl oratories offered, stated that, still in the 1950s, oratories for boys and young men “conservavano una capacità d’iniziativa più ampia e articolata soprattutto nei campi ricreativo e sportivo, che assicurava maggior incidenza a livello territoriale” (had more room for initiative, especially in the fields of recreation and sports, which ensured stronger impact on a local level). See Luciano Caimi, “La questione giovanile: fra oratori, associazioni, movimenti. Dal 1861 alla fine del secolo XX.” Web. Accessed 6 August 2013. http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-questione-giovanile-fra-oratori-associazioni-movimenti-dal-1861-alla-fine-del-secolo-xx_%28Cristiani-d%27Italia%29

⁴ Franco Frassine, *Riverisco, sior ciurat. Appunti per un iter storico sull’Oratorio bresciano nel XX secolo* (Brescia: Centro Oratori Bresciani, 2002), 30. Caimi also states that the lack of specific scholarly works on all-girl oratories in the fifteen years after the war makes difficult a reconstruction and appraisal of their work. Luciano Caimi, “Popolo e educazione cristiana: gli oratori.” *Chiesa e progetto educativo nell’Italia del secondo dopoguerra. 1945-1958* (Brescia: La Scuola. 1988), 227.

⁵ The book by Ambito per la pastorale giovanile – Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, *Oratorio cantiere aperto* (Roma: LAS, 2013) is now helping to fill the previous gap. However, it only focuses on FMA all-girl oratories.

⁶ In 2013 and 2014, I interviewed some 30 women born between 1926 and 1950 about their experience acting on the Catholic stage and, by extension, about the all-girl oratories where such experience took place. Some of the women had answered a call I published in the Salesian alumnae newsletter. Others belonged to village senior citizen centers where I knew there had been all-girl performances in the postwar years. In some cases (as in Buscate and Vanzaghello), recovery of oral memories had already begun in the senior citizen centers themselves. See “La storia degli oratori,” web. Accessed 15 February 2013, <http://nobits.it/la-storia-degli-oratori>. In all cases, the women I

opportunity to spend time together, learn useful skills, and develop their creativity, in addition to its traditional function, which was to offer the time for spiritual and social development in a safe environment. Invariably, they agreed that their experience was an important moment of socialization and growth in the challenging times after the end of World War II. As I hope to show, the oratory was also an essential place for the realization of the Catholic plan toward the education and moralization of young women. It provided these women with behavioral rules and role models that would ultimately influence their vocation, career, and family life. However, the oratory experience for the women who lived it was also liberating, as it offered them a possibility to leave their family environment, become involved in creative activities, go on outings, acquire a sense of social awareness, and take on leadership roles.

In this article, I aim to bring to light the experience of the oratory for girls, teenagers, and young women in the postwar years, showing how it provided a privileged time and space for personal, spiritual, and social growth in the difficult period of the country's reconstruction. After a brief introduction regarding the origins and development of the oratory in Italy, I will focus on the years between 1946 and the late 1950s. Then, drawing on the oral sources and archival material that I have collected, I will delineate the characteristics of the all-girl oratory experience and underline the significance of this forgotten moment of the postwar years.

Origins and Development of the Oratory

In modern Italy, oratories are youth centers sponsored by a Catholic institution.⁷ Traditionally, their main goal has been to “istruire i ragazzi nella dottrina cristiana e, contemporaneamente, preservali dai ‘pericoli della strada’ e fornire nozioni elementari di cultura” (teach Christian doctrine to young people, while keeping them safe from the ‘dangers of the streets’ and providing them with a basic cultural foundation).⁸ Oratories originated in the sixteenth century thanks to the Congregazione dell’Oratorio founded by Filippo Neri (1515–95). They became increasingly popular and important between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, initially because of the work of religious institutions such as the Congregazione di S. Giuseppe, founded by Leonardo Murialdo (1828–1900) in 1873, and the Salesians, founded by Giovanni Bosco (1815–88), also in 1873. Oratories were diffused especially in the North, with the cities of Milan, Brescia, Bergamo, Turin, and Venice having the largest numbers.⁹ Between 1895 and 1904, for example, the diocese of Milan could boast of the creation of 145 oratories (82 for boys, 63 for girls).¹⁰ These institutions offered young people the space and time for prayer and religious instruction, alternating between games, music, and other recreational activities.

After the first decade of the twentieth century, to ensure continued interest on the part of young people who had started to work, oratori expanded their activities to weekdays, creating initiatives that would help young people increase their work prospects, improve their literacy and train them for trades, as well as sometimes establishing welfare centers and savings opportunities

interviewed were still connected either to the religious institution that had hosted the oratory, or to the village community where such experience had taken place.

The interviews were semi-structured, as I had a list of questions. However, the questions often elicited answers on more general topics. Some of the interviews were individual, but most were in groups, in senior citizens centers or in the oratory itself. As most oratories were established in the North, about 70% of my interviews took place in Lombardy and Piedmont. Although in this article I refer to only a few, I am very grateful to all the women who took the time to share their memories with me, and gave me permission to quote them in my research.

⁷ On oratories, their tradition, mission, and way forward, see the document of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, “Il laboratorio dei talenti. Nota pastorale sul valore e la missione degli oratori nel contesto dell’educazione alla vita buona del Vangelo.” 2 February 2013. Web. Accessed 10 March 2015. http://www.chiesacattolica.it/documenti/2013/04/00016353_il_laboratorio_dei_talent.html.

⁸ Vecchio “Gli oratori milanesi,” 391

⁹ Caimi “La questione giovanile.”

¹⁰ Ambrogio Giussani, *Una scuola di vita. 80° oratorio 1932-2012* (Oratorio San Giuseppe – Bresso 2012), 17.

for its members. The events of World War I and the advent of Fascism, with its own compulsory youth associations, limited the activities of oratories, which had to renounce their social concerns and curtail their sporting activities, now to be controlled by the regime.¹¹ However, their social function, especially in large cities, grew enormously in the last years of World War II and during the country's reconstruction, when the immediate needs of young people who had been left orphans, homeless, and jobless rendered oratories a prime space, not only for sheltering, feeding and entertaining, but also for beginning the process of the young people's moral and spiritual recovery.¹² By 1954, there were 5,387 oratories in Italy: 4,064 in the North, 751 in the Center, and 562 in the South and the islands.¹³

In fact, most parishes, especially in the North, had two oratories: one for boys and one for girls. The boys' oratory was most often in a building separate from the church itself. It would include a chapel, sports fields, gathering rooms, and housing for the priest in charge. The girls' oratories, on the other hand, were often attached to nursery schools and nuns' institutions and were mostly led by nuns.¹⁴ The first oratory for girls in Turin, a city which in the second part of the nineteenth century saw its population triplicate and many girls and young women take up unqualified work in factories, opened in 1850. About three hundred young women—mostly factory workers—would attend on Sunday, when they were “ammaestrata di religione e allevate alla cristiana pietà da pie maestre torinesi [...] all'oratorio si divagavano alternando esercizi di leggere e scrivere, così alla sera tornavano liete alle loro case sotto l'usbergo di sentirsi pure” (taught religion and instructed in Christian piety by devout teachers from Turin [...] at the oratory they would alternate between reading and writing exercises, so that in the evenings they would return home happy, safeguarded by the feeling of their purity).¹⁵

The concern for the spiritual well-being of young women was also paramount for Maria Domenica Mazzarello, who, after creating a sewing workshop and catechism classes for the local girls in her native village of Mornese (Alessandria), in 1863 also decided to invite them to stay and play for the rest of the Sunday hours:

La domenica noi assistiamo le fanciulle in chiesa, facciamo loro il Catechismo; cosa buona. Ma dopo l'istruzione e le sacre funzioni, le fanciulle dove vanno? E cosa fanno? Sono troppo abbandonate a se stesse, e in pericolo di offendere il Signore, il che non mi lascia tranquilla. [...] Ora se nei giorni festivi le radunassimo nel nostro laboratorio e le conducessimo a divertirsi nel cortiletto, le avremmo sempre sotto i nostri occhi e le preserveremmo dai pericoli.¹⁶

A few years later, Mazzarello would meet Don Bosco and, with him, found the congregation of the Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (FMA), also known as Salesian sisters, who, by

¹¹ Manfredi, “Oratori e la chiesa in Italia.”

¹² Pietro Braido, “Le metamorfosi dell'Oratorio salesiano tra il secondo dopoguerra e il postconcilio vaticano II (1944-1984),” *Ricerche storiche salesiane* 25 (2006): 300.

¹³ Archambault, “Il calcio e l'oratorio,” 139.

¹⁴ Vecchio, “Gli oratori milanesi,” 390.

¹⁵ Quoted in Angela Bertero, “Don Bosco, le sue suore e l'Oratorio femminile a Torino,” in *Torino e Don Bosco*, edited by Giuseppe Bracco (Torino: Archivio storico della città di Torino, 1989) 279.

¹⁶ Quoted in Ambito per la pastorale giovanile – Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, *Oratorio cantiere aperto*, 119. Even today the courtyard is considered the symbolic space representative of Salesian education (Ambito per la pastorale giovanile – Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, *Oratorio cantiere aperto*, 123). “On Sundays, we take the young girls to church and teach them catechism; a good thing. But after lessons and service, where do these girls go? And what do they do? They are left to themselves and are in risk of offending the Lord, which worries me. [...] If on public holidays we gathered them and brought them to the courtyard to have some fun, we would be able to keep an eye on them and protect them from danger.”

1900, were in charge of more than eighty oratories for girls.¹⁷ The number would rise to almost six hundred in 1940.¹⁸

In addition to its protective function, the Salesian oratory allowed many girls to expand their horizons, generally limited to their family, home, school, or work. Especially in urban areas, oratories reached lower-class girls who normally would not have had access to schooling and religious education. In order to promote their religious instruction and to support their socialization, the oratory would be open in the evening, as the 1912 *Regolamento per gli oratori festivi* instructs: “Le giovani operaie potrebbero avere, in ore stabilite, lezioni particolari di taglio, cucito, disegno, contabilità, italiano, canto e istruzione religiosa, tutto indirizzato allo scopo di formarle buone cristiane, utili a se stesse, alla famiglia ed alla società” (young female workers could receive, during establish hours, lessons on sewing, design, accounting, Italian, singing, and religious teaching, all of this aimed towards training them to become good Christians, useful to themselves, their family, and society) (See Fig. 1).¹⁹ Those who were still in school, on the other hand, “oltre alla desiderata ricreazione” (beyond the desired recreation), would find a space to complete their homework under supervision and have a short catechism lesson before the final evening prayers.²⁰



Fig. 1: Cooking classes at the oratory of Concorezzo (MB), early 1930s. Courtesy of the Archivio Storico della Città di Concorezzo.

The Salesian oratory was open to all girls, not only practising Christians—as long as there was no anti-Catholic propaganda. It was free and not compulsory. Thus, to ensure the young women’s attendance it was important to offer attractive activities like games, singing, prizes, performances, trips, celebrations, and awards. And although the oratory was particularly successful with girls of lower social classes who did not have access to costly alternatives, in many places it also attracted wealthier girls, thus contributing to the mixing of social classes.²¹

Oratories led by Salesian sisters were probably the most numerous throughout Italy, but other female religious congregations, such as the Suore Canossiane, Suore Maestre di santa Dorotea, Ancelle della Carità, Figlie di sant’Angela Merici, Suore di Maria Bambina, Suore del Santo Natale, and Suore delle Poverelle, were also in charge of oratories for girls.²²

¹⁷ Grazia Loparco, “La tipologia delle opere,” in *Le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in Italia. Donne nell’educazione*, edited by Grazia Loparco and Maria Teresa Spiga (Roma: LAS 2011), 109.

¹⁸ Loparco, “La tipologia delle opere,” 119-120.

¹⁹ Quoted in *Ambito per la pastorale giovanile – Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, Oratorio cantiere aperto*, 24.

²⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ambito per la pastorale giovanile – Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, Oratorio cantiere aperto*, 27-29.

²² Many of the women I interviewed attended Salesian oratories (Aliverti, Carcatella, Cucco, Falava, Lombardo, Puricelli, Strano, Villa). E. and T. Badino’s oratory was supervised by the Suore del santo Natale. Banda, Galimberti, Rivolta, Schenal, and Tafella attended an oratory led by the sisters of Santa Giovanna Antida Thouret. Ragazzi frequented the Suore Poverelle’s oratory.

The Postwar Years

The end of World War II and the fall of Fascism brought about a period of intense change in Italy, influencing the position of women in society. Women had become more independent and mobile during the war: at home, where they took on responsibilities that would normally have befallen their husbands, fathers, brothers, or sons, and, after September 1943, outside the home, by participating in the anti-Fascist armed resistance or enlisting in the Auxiliary Services of the army in Mussolini's Republic of Salò.

After the war, women acquired the right to vote and be voted into political office. They were widely encouraged to become involved in the process of reconstruction of the country and exercise their influence in the elections. Even Catholic women were exhorted to take part in the public world: "La vostra ora è sonata, donne e giovani cattoliche," declared Pope Pius XII in 1945; "la vita pubblica ha bisogno di voi" (Your hour has come, Catholic women and girls, the public life needs you). The need for Catholic women's social participation was due to the social and political conditions of the country, which, the Pope warned, were at risk of becoming "ancora più incerte per la santità del focolare domestico e quindi per la dignità della donna" (even more uncertain for the sanctity of the home and, thus, for the dignity of woman).²³

In fact, while exhorting women to get involved and cast their vote "per contenere le correnti che minacciano il focolare, per combattere le dottrine che ne scalfano le fondamenta" (to stop the currents that threaten the home, to fight the doctrines that undermine its foundations),²⁴ the Pope also encouraged them to resume their place in the home (il focolare), a fact favored by the return of men from the war and women's consequent loss of jobs.

The physical presence of a woman in her home, suggests Luisa Tasca, "offered a response to the desire for order and social peace, to the need for family tranquility after the lacerations and the disorientation of war."²⁵ On the contrary, the woman who labors in a factory, Pius XII lamented, will abandon her home, which "forse già squallida e angusta, diviene anche più misera per mancanza di cura" (perhaps already squalid and modest, will deteriorate further for lack of care), with additional dire consequences for the entire family, who will rarely get together to eat, rest and pray. Young girls' formation, in particular, would suffer, the Pope foresaw: "Abituata a vedere la mamma sempre fuori di casa e la casa stessa così triste nel suo abbandono, ella sarà incapace di trovarvi qualsiasi fascino, non proverà il minimo gusto per le austere occupazioni domestiche, non saprà comprenderne la nobiltà e la bellezza, né desiderare di dedicarsi un giorno come sposa e madre."²⁶

In addition to the threats to the "santità del focolare domestico" and its inhabitants, which could be brought about by historical and political changes in Italian society, a further danger was constituted by American consumerism, with as yet inaccessible products (such as domestic appliances, cosmetics, and cars) seen in films and magazines, which were becoming objects of desire already by the end of the 1940s.²⁷ This exposure to new products and lifestyles from the US was cause for concern in the Catholic Church, which looked with suspicion on

²³ Pio XII, "La fondamentale e multiforme missione della donna nel momento presente," *Discorsi e radiomessaggi di sua santità Pio XII. Settimo anno di pontificato 2 marzo 1945-1 marzo 1946* (Milano: Società editrice Vita e Pensiero, 1946), 231.

²⁴ Pio XII, "La fondamentale e multiforme missione," 235.

²⁵ Luisa Tasca, "The 'Average Housewife' in Post-World War II Italy," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 96.

²⁶ Pio XII, "La fondamentale e multiforme missione," 233. "Used to seeing her mother constantly out, and the house itself so sad and abandoned, she will be unable to find in it any sort of appeal; she will not in the least enjoy domestic occupations, will not understand their nobility and beauty, and will not wish to one day give herself over to them as a wife and a mother."

²⁷ Penelope Morris, "Introduction," *Women in Italy, 1945-1960. An Interdisciplinary Study* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 10. See also Stephen Gundle, "The Americanization of Daily Life. Television and Consumerism in Italy in the 1950s," *Italian History and Culture* 2 (1996): 29-30, for ads promoting American products already in 1950.

materialism, changes in social customs, and what it saw as a decline in moral standards.²⁸ In a speech he gave in 1949, Pope Pius XII warned that materialism was exerting its nefarious influence on both urban and rural Italian society, but especially on the youth:

Come un alito pestifero il materialismo pervade sempre più tutto l'essere e produce i suoi più malefici frutti nel matrimonio, nella famiglia e nei giovani. È, si può dire, unanime il giudizio che la moralità di tanta gioventù è in continuo decadimento. [...] È superfluo il ricordare quanto la radio e il cinema sono stati usati ed abusati per la diffusione di quel materialismo, e quanto essi, il cattivo libro, la licenziosa rivista illustrata, lo spettacolo inverecondo, il ballo immorale, l'immodestia delle spiagge, hanno contribuito ad aumentare la superficialità, la mondanità, la sensualità della gioventù.²⁹

In an earlier speech, the Pope had also insisted on the need to save children from the dangerous effects of the dissolution of families or the lack of education in the family, mentioning the “rovine spirituali, che nei fanciulli e negli adolescenti di sei, di dieci, di quindici anni, producono quasi inevitabilmente l'influsso continuo della scuola areligiosa o antireligiosa, i pericoli della strada, l'aria moralmente malsana o forse corrotta della fabbrica e dell'officina” (spiritual destruction, in children and teenagers of six, ten, fifteen, produced almost inevitably by the continuous influence of areligious or antireligious schooling, the dangers of the streets, the factory or the workshop's morally unhealthy or perhaps corrupted air).³⁰

Though the streets may have endangered all youth, Pius XII explicitly expressed his concern for the education of young women, who might not receive that “educazione femminile” (female education) which he considered a “condizione necessaria della sua preparazione e della sua formazione a una vita degna di lei” (a necessary condition in the preparation and development of a life worthy of her).³¹ While ideally such training should be provided at home, the Pope also praised those “scuole di economia domestica, che mirano a fare della fanciulla e della giovane di oggi la donna e la madre di domani” (schools of home economics that aim to make of the child and the young woman of today the wife and mother of tomorrow).³²

The sentiments articulated in the acts of the General Council of the Salesian sisters in 1947 resemble those expressed by Pius XII, to whom they make specific reference:

ovunque [...] si assiste ad un *generale disorientamento*. Le giovinette non sanno più distinguere il bene dal male, il lecito dal non lecito, e purtroppo, agiscono e si comportano in conseguenza di questa errata concezione [...] Ne consegue che si nota ovunque:

- a) una falsa concezione della vita;
- b) una sete sfrenata di godimento;
- c) una immodestia crescente nel vestire;
- d) una funesta libertà nelle letture.³³

²⁸ Morris, “Introduction,” 11-12.

²⁹ Pio XII, “Alle donne dell’Azione Cattolica Italiana nel quarantennio del loro sodalizio.” 1949. Web. Accessed 14 December 2015. https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1949/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19490724_quanto-legittima.html. “Like a pestilent breeze, materialism increasingly pervades our being and corrupts marriage, family, and youth. It is, one could say, unanimously agreed upon that the morality of so much of our youth is in constant decay. [...] It is not necessary to remember to what extent radio and cinema have been used and abused by the diffusion of this materialism, and how much these—the evil book, the licentious illustrated magazine, the shameless spectacle, immoral dancing, the immodesty of beaches—have contributed to the rise of superficiality, mundanity, and sensuality in the youth.”

³⁰ Pio XII, “Discorso ai partecipanti al convegno della Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica.” 1946. Web. Accessed 14 December 2015. https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1946/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19460420_azione-cattolica.htm.

³¹ Pio XII, “La fondamentale e multiforme missione,” 238-239.

³² Pio XII, “La fondamentale e multiforme missione,” 239.

³³ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI dell’Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice* (Torino: Casa generalizia, 1947), 209, emphasis in the text. “everywhere [...] there is a *general disorientation*. Young women cannot distinguish anymore between good and

To fight this general decline in morality, Salesians proposed for their oratorians the study of catechism, piety (particularly devotion to Jesus and Mary Helper of Christians), love of work, and, especially, housework: “La donna sentirà rinascere con esso l’amore alla casa, il bisogno di prodigarsi per i propri cari; e risponderà così agli accorati appelli del Santo Pontefice, che la richiama alla santità del lavoro domestico” (Woman will feel with it a renewed love for the home, the need to give herself over to her loved ones; and she will thus respond to the heartfelt call of the Holy Pontiff, who summons her to the sanctity of domestic work).³⁴ Thus, to make sure they would attract girls and teenagers in the postwar years, oratories would distribute food parcels, dispense clothes, present awards, and organize outings. In some cases, nuns would wait at the school or factories at exit time on Saturday and invite the girls to attend the oratory on Sunday, announcing the planned activities.³⁵

During and after World War II, to have an actual physical place in which to find shelter and fun—even food and clothing—was not to be discounted. Antonietta, for example, who was eight when she first started attending the Salesian oratory in Naples in 1943, fondly remembers it as her “oasi di salvezza” (oasis of salvation), a protected place in which she felt loved and secure. Sunday was the day specifically set aside for the oratory. She recalls that the nuns first taught the girls catechism, then gave them bread with a delicious spread donated by the Americans. They would sing and play and not want to go home.³⁶ Rosetta from Brescia calls the oratory “un’isola felice” (a happy island): “stavamo sempre qui, anche d’estate per imparare a ricamare...stavamo insieme, ci divertivamo in un ambiente sano” (we were always here, even during the summer, to learn to embroider; we had fun in a healthy environment).³⁷ “C’era un clima di famiglia,” adds Carmela from Catania, “si aspettava la domenica per andare in oratorio” (There was a spirit of family; we waited for Sunday to go to the oratory).³⁸ Lina from Vanzaghello (Milan) summarises the feeling of safety and belonging that the oratory generated thus: “All’oratorio si faceva tutto. Si imparava a cucire, a cantare a recitare, a pregare, a stare insieme, a giocare, a divertirsi...il tempo libero era lì. Casa e oratorio. [...] Tutto quello che si aveva, si aveva in oratorio: era la nostra seconda casa” (At the oratory we did everything. We’d learn how to sew, sing, recite, pray, be together, play, have fun...our free time was spent there. Home and oratory. [...] Everything we had was in the oratory: it was our second home).³⁹

An Unrestrained Thirst for Pleasure

It would not be surprising that, as a reaction to the end of a long war and an even longer period of dictatorship, people old and young would want to spend time on enjoyable activities. In the postwar years, dancing became one of the more popular pastimes. Young men and women would meet in newly created dance halls on Saturdays and Sundays or would dance to records in their homes.⁴⁰ Since the time of Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello, however, the Salesians had held a very negative view of dancing. Drawing on the authority of classical authors and the fathers of the Church, Don Bosco described dancing as a “divertimento pericolosissimo pei

evil, right and wrong, and, unfortunately, act and behave according to this misconception [...] It follows that everywhere we find:

- a) a false conception of life;
- b) an unrestrained thirst for pleasure;
- c) a growing immodesty of dress;
- d) a baleful freedom in reading.”

³⁴ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 210-211.

³⁵ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 189-190.

³⁶ Antonietta Carcatella in discussion with the author, 21 May 2013.

³⁷ Rosetta Ragazzi in discussion with the author, 24 May 2013.

³⁸ Carmela Lombardo in discussion with the author, 8 January 2014.

³⁹ Lina Schenal in discussion with the author, 30 May 2013.

⁴⁰ For more details on the popularity of dancing in the 1950s, see David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 35; 86–87.

costumi” (a very dangerous pastime for behavior) and a “scuola d’incontinenza” (school of incontinence) which every good Christian should avoid.⁴¹ Dancing, added Maria Mazzarello in 1878 to the oratorians of Lu Monferrato (Alessandria), “è un’invenzione del diavolo per rovinare la salute del corpo e più ancora quella dell’anima” (was invented by the devil to ruin the health of the body, and even more so, of the soul).⁴²

This negative attitude towards dancing emerges in the postwar years as well; for example, in a 1946 play by Salesian author Lina Dalcetri, entitled *La rete di Satana*, devils claim that the most effective way to conquer souls is through dance. Dance halls are their “kingdom” where unsuspecting souls are easily led into temptation and sin. As one demon instructs his companions, “tutto, qui dentro, dalla musica ai movimenti, ai contatti, ai gesti, alle parole, agli sguardi, agli atteggiamenti, tutto dovete, come le corde di uno strumento, far vibrare in una sola nota infernale di malizia e di peccato” (everything here inside, from the music to the movements, to the touches and gestures, to the looks and actions, everything, you must make vibrate, like the strings of an instrument, in one infernal note of guile and sin).⁴³ Thus, young women attending the oratory were discouraged or explicitly forbidden from attending public dances.⁴⁴



Fig. 2: A dance on the Salesian stage, in Cagno (BS), 1958. From the Archives of the FMA General House, Rome.

⁴¹ Giovanni Bosco, *Il cattolico provveduto nelle pratiche di pietà* (Torino: Tipografia dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco de Sales, 1868). Web. Accessed 29 August 2017. http://www.donboscosanto.eu/Scritti/don_bosco-il_cattolico_provveduto_per_le_pratiche_di_pietà.html#A069001209.

⁴² “A Lu Monferrato,” in *Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice: Cronistoria*. Vol 2. “1872-1879. L’istituto di Mornese. La prima espansione,” edited by Giselda Capetti (Roma: Scuola tipografica privata FMA, 1974). Web. Accessed 29 August 2017. http://www.cgfmanet.org/Bd/Documenti/0810001_Ita.zip.

⁴³ Lina Dalcetri, *La rete di Satana*. In *Purezza e martirio (ballo e rispetto umano)* (Colle Don Bosco: Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1946), 23.

In a later comedy by Canossian sister Lidia Micaela Cressin, two little brave devils still boast about their successes, which consist of encouraging girls and teenagers to attend dances and dress immodestly (another issue of the times, as discussed below):

1 DIAVOLETTO: sono riuscito a far mettere un vestito corto corto e senza maniche ad una bambina che va a scuola dalle Suore! (Devil: I succeeded in having a girl who attends school with the sisters to wear a very short sleeveless dress!)

2 DIAVOLETTO: Non è mica un’impresa difficile al giorno d’oggi. E io allora, che ho mandato alla festa da ballo una ragazzina di tredici anni? Ti par poco? È insegnarle la strada che porta a casa nostra. (Devil: It’s not much effort nowadays. And me, who have sent a thirteen-year-old to the ball? Does that seem like little? It’s showing her the road that leads to our house).

Lidia Micaela Cressin, *I diavoletti coraggiosi. Teatro delle giovani* 1 (1954), 11-12.

⁴⁴ The undated “Regole per le giovani dell’Oratorio” found in the archives of the church of the SS. Nazaro and Celso in Brescia stated that “Alle ragazze dell’oratorio sarà sempre vietato l’appartenere a balli promiscui” (the girls from the oratory will always be forbidden from taking part in promiscuous dances).

Nevertheless, despite this negative attitude toward dance in general, dances would still be part of the action in many plays performed in Salesian oratories. Sometimes, for example, young actresses would perform a folkloric dance to shorten the wait time between acts. In such cases, when choreographies seemed necessary on stage, the Salesian General Council still advised: “si badi [...] che non abbiano movimenti troppo simili al ballo o, in qualsiasi modo, somiglianti alle mollezze mondane” (be careful [...] not to make movements similar to those of dance or, in any way, reminiscent of mundane frivolities) (See Fig. 2).⁴⁵ And so Regina from Buscate (Milan) reports having learned to dance in the oratory for specific shows (and teaching those same dance moves to her friends later at home using her gramophone).⁴⁶

Carnival, the period preceding the season of Lent, was one of those times which represented the worrisome “sete sfrenata di godimento,” where the risk of oratory girls attending dances was highest. To prevent the oratorians from becoming involved in dangerous festive events, the sisters kept them very busy either by organizing floats for the traditional Carnival parade or staging comedies and farces for an audience made up of relatives and friends. In Vanzaghello, for example, the older oratory girls were in charge of decorating a float according to the theme of the year. Maria Luigia remembers the year when the theme was springtime. They created costumes with crepe paper for younger girls, each dressed as a different flower. Their efforts in costume-making and attention to details were such that their float always won in the unofficial competition held with the oratory of young men.⁴⁷



Fig. 3: Girls and young women dressed for a Carnival show in the oratory of Concorezzo (MB), 1940s. Courtesy of the Archivio Storico della Città di Concorezzo.

Cinema was also considered an extremely risky form of entertainment. The Salesians viewed it as “il pericolo più grave per il nostro spirito, perché assopisce ed estingue la delicatezza ed il pudore che Don Bosco ci lasciò come caratteristiche” (the most serious danger to our spirit, since it mellows and extinguishes the refinement and modesty that Don Bosco left us as a legacy).⁴⁸ Thus, the nuns’ preventive censorship extended to movies as well, as even in a parish cinema “i films riservano frequentemente sorprese assai dannose per le ragazze e sconcertanti

⁴⁵ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 229.

⁴⁶ Regina Cucco in discussion with the author, 28 May 2013.

⁴⁷ Maria Luigia Tafella in discussion with the author, 30 May 2013.

⁴⁸ Caimi, “Popolo e educazione cristiana,” 219.

per le Suore che le assistono” (films frequently surprise in ways that are rather dangerous for the young women and disconcerting for the sisters who attend them).⁴⁹ Anna from Buscate remembered in particular the case of the 1950 film *Domani è troppo tardi* with Annamaria Pierangeli, and the conflict it originated between the nun in charge of the oratory and the local priest:

La ragazzina protagonista per un bacio si toglieva la vita perché pensava di essere rimasta incinta. Il film l'avevano fatto apposta per far capire alle ragazzine com'era la vita. E il prete voleva mostrare il film all'oratorio. Di domenica, dopo le varie attività, c'era una suora che ci dava la buona settimana. Quella volta ha detto 'Daranno un film ma guai a voi se andate a vederlo'. Don Giuseppe l'ha saputo e l'ha sgridata. La domenica dopo ci ha detto 'Mi raccomando, vi voglio tutte al film'.⁵⁰

However, girls in Buscate sometimes managed to circumvent the cinema prohibition anyway—either legitimately, when the nuns closed the oratory for their annual retreat and the oratory girls could thus spend one Sunday a year at the movies, or secretly, by looking through the windows into a courtyard where movies were projected for the oratory boys.

In nearby Vanzaghello, in order to compete with a small private movie theater that had opened in the village, the parish priest set up his own cinema screen. The films he showed at the oratory theater were always “castigatissimi” (extremely proper).⁵¹ Moreover, the priest in his Sunday homily would often shame those who had gone to watch unsuitable films at the local competing movie house, as happened to Ida, who went to see *Pane, amore e fantasia* with her parents.⁵²

Partially to respond to these cinematic threats, the Salesians decided to “dar sviluppo al teatro come ad uno dei più sicuri e graditi divertimenti giovanili” (encourage theater as one of the safest and most relished youthful pastimes).⁵³ In addition to their ability to control the content of the text to be staged, Salesian theater also allowed for a longer commitment of time, energy, and enthusiasm for those who took part in it, as well as for emotional involvement from those in the audience. It likewise maintained the traditional separation between boys and girls. The FMA General Council of 1947, in fact, reiterated the provision of never allowing girls to perform in mixed casts, wear male clothes, or stage plays adapted from male repertoire.⁵⁴

Plays written specifically to be performed in oratories by all-girl casts would usually have a moralising, conservative message (See Fig. 4). Especially in Salesian oratories, girls were expected to perform the lives of the saints, miracles in Lourdes, or emotional conversion moments that would bring a prodigal daughter back to the fold.⁵⁵ However, as I soon discovered from my interviews, the young oratorians did not perform on the stage so much because they were fascinated or converted by the plays they were assigned, but rather because it was fun. As Maria from Alcamo (Trapani) summarized:

eravamo un gruppo e ci divertivamo molto a fare le cose assieme, [...] quindi facevamo [teatro] volentieri. Era un modo proprio per stare assieme perché poi il teatro ti da molte possibilità di

⁴⁹ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 84.

⁵⁰ Anna Villa in discussion with the author, 28 May 2013. “The young protagonist was about to take her life because of a kiss, as she thought she’d become pregnant. The film had purposely been made to teach girls how life truly was. And the priest wanted to show the film in the oratory. Sundays, after the various activities, there was a sister who gave a weekly speech. That time, she said ‘They’ll show a film but woe betide you if you dare to go see it.’ Don Giuseppe found out and scolded her. The following Sunday, he said ‘Please, I want you all at the film.’”

⁵¹ Schenal in discussion with the author.

⁵² Ida Galimberti in discussion with the author, 30 May 2013.

⁵³ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 227.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Daniela Cavallaro, *Educational Theatre for Women in Post-World War II Italy. A Stage of Their Own* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 63-65; 90-97.

incontro, perché devi leggere il testo, distribuire le parti, rileggere il testo, fare le prove, poi provare in palcoscenico, quindi era tutto un divertirsi, anche se era impegnarsi.⁵⁶



Fig. 4: An all-girl play staged in Oglianico (TO). From the Archives of the FMA General House, Rome.

Rehearsal times, in fact, allowed girls the freedom to escape from the confines of their homes, go out in the evening, and enjoy the company of their mates even after school or after work. At a time when young women's mobility was still quite restricted, and in villages where entertainment opportunities were limited, being part of a theater group gave all these girls a chance to be together and have fun in a manner that was acceptable to their parents. "Le commedie sono stati i miei primi momenti di libertà" (comedies were my first moments of freedom), remembered Rosetta.⁵⁷

A Growing Immodesty of Dress

In Salesian environments, a modest style of dress was expected: "almeno i vestiti sotto il ginocchio" (at least clothes below the knee) to begin with.⁵⁸ Many of my interviewees remembered that they had to wear sleeves down to the elbow when attending the oratory. Pants were forbidden. According to the Salesian sisters' General Council of 1947, a masculine style of clothing was to be avoided at all costs, as it could also bring "il contagio di abitudini maschili, come il fumare, l'atteggiamento spavaldo ed altro che deformano la delicata natura femminile" (spread of male habits, like smoking, arrogant behavior, and other things that damage the delicate female nature). Gonne-pantaloni (culottes) were permitted only for bicycle or horse riding.⁵⁹

Control over modesty was exercised even outside the oratory. Anna remembered being reprimanded publicly for wearing her brother's shorts when harvesting hay in her uncle's fields,

⁵⁶ Maria Sandias in discussion with the author, 5 June 2013. "we were a group and we had a lot of fun doing things together [...] so we participated (in the plays) willingly. It was a proper way of being together, as theater gives you many possibilities of encounters because you need to read the text, assign the roles, reread the text, rehearse, and then rehearse on the stage, so it was a lot of fun, even if it was hard work."

⁵⁷ Ragazzi in discussion with the author.

⁵⁸ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XII dell'Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice* (n. p. Scuola tipografica privata Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice 1953?), 306.

⁵⁹ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 75. The nuns, however, realised that it was often the mother who would dress her daughter inappropriately, and so it was necessary to educate the mother, not shame or punish the daughter. In any case, the nuns would not remove a girl for immodest clothing; they did not want the girl to lose out on her education. *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 75-76.

even though very few people could see her.⁶⁰ Control was also exercised on stage. The sister in charge of theater performances in Buriasco (Turin) would make sure that young actresses were not “troppo scollate” (wearing low-necked clothes) and that their costumes covered the knees.⁶¹ Emilia still has a photo of a borrowed elegant dress she used in a play: “Questo vestito qui aveva il braccio scoperto, ma non si poteva, bisognava coprire tutto. Allora io avevo dei conigli bianchi d’angora che ho pettinato ogni mattina finché ho avuto la lana da potermi fare questo golfino bianco; allora è andato bene.”⁶² Grazia from Catania had trouble when rehearsing for the role of a dancing gypsy: “Dovevo fare la danza di una zingara. Volteggiavo... e la suora disse ‘Bisogna mettere i mutandoni altrimenti qui si vede tutto!’ e io ‘Ma suor Maria io devo danzare!’... allora mi fecero mettere i mutandoni” (I played the role of a dancing gypsy. I twirled... and the sister said ‘You need to wear bloomers, otherwise we can see everything!’ and I said ‘But sister Maria, I have to dance! So they made me wear bloomers’).⁶³

A Baleful Freedom in Reading

The Salesian nuns were also very careful regarding the kind of readings they recommended to the young ladies in their care, as they were concerned about “le rovine che la stampa immorale cagiona alla inesperta gioventù” (the ruin that immoral literature brings about in the unexperienced youth).⁶⁴ They highly recommended their own magazine *Primavera* (which began publication in 1950), while frowning upon the very popular fotoromanzi. *Grand Hotel* in particular was “proprio scomunicato” (outright prohibited).⁶⁵ Antonietta remembered that one of the plays she performed in—as the devil specifically addressed the problem of bad readings:

Mi ricordo la recita che si chiamava ‘Lecture funeste’. Nel dopoguerra cominciavano a uscire quei giornoletti tipo ‘Grand Hotel’ che erano scandalosi per le figliole dabbene; potevano mettere grilli in testa alle ragazze con queste fughe d’amore...cose impensabili allora. Con queste lecture funeste si andava all’inferno, dal diavolo. Mi fecero un vestito nero con le corna rosse. E io uscivo d’impeto sulla scena con delle catene, tra fumo...I bambini guardavano e si mettevano a piangere perché pensavano che veramente fossi il diavolo. [...] [Alla fine] il diavolo veniva sconfitto perché la ragazza frequentava l’istituto e veniva messa sulla buona strada.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Villa in discussion with the author.

⁶¹ Teresa Badino in discussion with the author, 2 June 2013. On the fashion styles promoted by the Catholic press, see Niamh Cullen, “Morals, modern identities and the Catholic woman: fashion in *Famiglia Cristiana*, 1954-1968,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 33-52.

⁶² Emilia Badino in discussion with the author, 2 June 2013. “This dress left my arms exposed, but that wasn’t possible, we had to cover up. Back then I had white angora rabbits that I groomed every morning until I had enough wool to make this white sweater; then it was all fine.”

⁶³ Grazia Strano in discussion with the author, 8 January 2014.

⁶⁴ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 106.

⁶⁵ Cucco in discussion with the author. On *Primavera*, see Ilaria Mattioni, “Editoria periodica salesiana ed educazione femminile nell’Italia del secondo dopoguerra. Il caso di ‘Primavera. Rivista per giovanette’ (1950-1979),” *History of Education & Children’s Literature* 2, no. 2 (2007): 291-312, and Mariagrazia Fanchi, “A ben vedere. Cinema e media in *Primavera. Rivista per giovanette*,” in *Cinema e scritture femminili. Letterate italiane fra la pagina e lo schermo* edited by Lucia Cardone e Sara Filippelli (n. p.: Iacobelli editore, 2011), 166-179. In her *Da grande farò la santa, Modelli etici e valori religiosi nella stampa cattolica femminile per l’infanzia e la gioventù (1950-1979)* (Firenze: Nerbini 2011), Ilaria Mattioni also looks at later Catholic publications for girls and young women. On the importance of *Grand Hotel* in 1950s Italy, see Angelo Ventrone, “Tra propaganda e passione: ‘Grand Hotel’ e l’Italia degli anni ‘50,” *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 17. No. 4 (1988): 603-631 and Niamh Cullen, “Changing emotional landscapes? *Grand Hotel* and representations of love and courtship in 1950s Italy,” *Cultural and Social History* 11, no. 2 (2014): 285-306.

⁶⁶ Carcatella in discussion with the author. “I remember the play, which was called ‘Evil readings’. The postwar saw the rise of many magazines like ‘Grand Hotel,’ scandalous for respectable girls, who could get in their heads crazy ideas, what with all of these elopements...unthinkable things back then. These evil readings could guarantee you’d go to hell, with the devil. They made me a black dress with red horns. I impetuously came on stage, dragging chains amidst smoke... The children watched and started crying because they truly thought I was the devil. [...] [In the end] the devil was defeated because the girl attended the institute and was set on the right track.”

Fotoromanzi were not the only suspects of possible corruption for young women; so too were encyclopaedias showing works of art representing naked young men or books meant to teach young women about their development, even though they came from reputable sources. Anna recalled the time when she tried to read a book written by a well-respected Catholic author: “Angela Sorgato aveva scritto un libro per spiegare alle ragazze come si diventava donne. Io l’avevo ordinato ma la suora dell’oratorio mi disse ‘Se lo leggi, non entri più all’oratorio’” (Angela Sorgato had written a book to explain to girls how you become a woman. I had ordered it but the sister from the oratory said to me ‘If you read it, you’re not welcome here anymore’).⁶⁷

The Salesians were not the only order to control the oratorians’ readings. Maria Luigia reported that in Vanzaghello’s oratory for boys there was a small library, with books (often the lives of the saints) chosen according to age. The girls, however, were not allowed to pick out their own books for further reading; they could only take what was given to them. They too were strongly discouraged from readings fotoromanzi—*Grand Hotel* and *Bolero* in particular—as they were “stupidaggini” (nonsense). Some of the older oratory girls would visit families in order to sell what was known as “la buona stampa,” that is, periodicals of Christian inspiration such as *Alba*, *Gioia*, *Famiglia Cristiana*, *Vita femminile*.⁶⁸

A False Conception of Life

In order to fight the postwar growing tendency toward materialism, denounced and condemned by Pius XII, oratories insisted on the necessity not to consider only one’s own needs and wants, but also to attend to others. Many oratory activities were organised as fundraisers, with proceeds donated to the missions, local people, or institutions in need. Teresa and Emilia recalled that on the occasion of the Polesine flooding of 1951

abbiamo fatto la raccolta per gli alluvionati, e allora c’erano anche dei ragazzi dell’Azione Cattolica che avevano il cavallo con il carro, e si andava così in giro per le famiglie a chiedere qualcosa per gli alluvionati, poi si portavano a Pinerolo dove c’era un centro che li smistava.⁶⁹

Maria would sometimes get together with the other oratory girls to prepare a meal for the poor.⁷⁰ Donations or entry fees received from theater audiences were used to pay for the performance or parish expenses.

Even something as minorly consumeristic as pocket money was used to teach a lesson in generosity. “Così spendevamo la nostra paghetta” (this is how we spent our pocket money), explained Angela from Buscate:

Le suore avevano una cassetina di quelle della frutta, divisa in scomparti, tutta foderata bene, e lì c’erano caramelle gommose, dolcetti, liquirizia, stringhe di liquirizia, liquirizia di legno ... Però poi dovevamo lasciare qualche centesimo nella cassetta dei cinesini, perché allora si dovevano far battezzare dai missionari.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Villa in discussion with the author.

⁶⁸ Tafella in discussion with the author.

⁶⁹ E. and T. Badino in discussion with the author. “We organized a drive for people affected by the flood, and there were also boys from Azione Cattolica who had horse-drawn cart, and that’s how we went around to ask families for help for the flooded; then everything was taken to Pinerolo, where it was sorted out.”

⁷⁰ Sandias in discussion with the author.

⁷¹ Angela Puricelli in discussion with the author, 28 May 2013. “Cinesini” was the generic term to indicate children from distant countries. *Oratorio “Maria Immacolata”: 50 anni di storia al femminile* (2014). Web. Accessed 10 October 2015. <https://parrocchiasanmartinobollate.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/inserto50c2b0oratoriofemminile2014.pdf>, 2.

At these candy counters, 10 lire would buy you 10 Golias. Licorice laces and sugar sticks were more expensive.⁷² By learning the needs of children like themselves, it was hoped that oratorians would obtain a sense of responsibility that would remain in later life: “siano esse informate [...] delle necessità in cui si trovano tante loro coetanee bisognose e meno fortunate di loro. Le avremo pronte e generose collaboratrici, con quello slancio con cui soltanto la gioventù educata cristianamente è capace.”⁷³ Many of the women I interviewed remarked on the sense of openness to the other that the oratory experience gave them, and on their continuing volunteering activities in favor of the community.

(Not Only Religious) Instruction

Mandatory religious instruction at the Sunday oratory normally took one of two forms: a catechism class or a long homily/lecture by the parish priest or sister in charge. Again, the Salesian General Council of 1947 made it clear that catechism should be offered every Sunday at the oratory and should be focused on the needs of the oratorians, “i pericoli in cui si trovano durante la settimana, per premunirle con saggezza materna e difenderle dal male” (the dangers in which they find themselves during the week, to provide them with maternal wisdom and defend them from evil).⁷⁴ Ten years later, the dangers appeared to shift somewhat, coming now specifically from lay education. Therefore, the council suggested that the catechism offered to those oratorians who attended a state school should “arrivare a correggere gli errori che la Scuola laica può aver inoculato” (correct the faults that a lay schooling might have caused).⁷⁵

Specific religious instruction did not feature prominently, however, in the memories of the women I interviewed. They mentioned that small prizes could be awarded to those able to better memorise their catechism, but they especially remembered the general educational message they received, which encouraged proper behavior, warned against possible temptations, and supported respect toward others. Rather than for their catechism lessons, some nuns are fondly remembered for their roles as advisors of girls facing teenage problems: to some sympathetic sisters in particular “si potevano raccontare le proprie esperienze ed emozioni, avviando dialoghi costruttivi; da adolescenti potevamo esporre dubbi e domande su [...] argomenti che a casa non si osava affrontare” (you could tell your own experiences and emotions, opening the way for productive conversations; as adolescents we could express doubts and questions about [...] subjects that we didn’t dare bring up at home).⁷⁶ “Il fatto di avere una persona che ascolta a quest’età è molto importante” (Having someone to listen to you at this age is very important), concluded Lina.⁷⁷

“The sisters had a little crate for fruit that divided in compartments; it was all covered up, and inside it were gummis, sweets, licorice, licorice lace, licorice wood... But we had to leave some money in the crate of the *cinesini* because they had to be baptized by the missionaries.”

⁷² Giussani *Una scuola di vita*, 110. In their 2004 song “Oratorium,” which refers to a more contemporary, mixed gender version of the oratory, the band “Elio e le storie tese” lists several more delicacies associated with the oratory: “liquirizie colorate, stringhe più cocacoline e un mollicchione rosa” (colored licorice, laces plus coca colas and a pink *mollicchione*) as well as “un ghiacciolo all’amarena” (a black cherry popsicle) and “una spuma nera” (a dark ‘spuma’) which still costs one hundred lire, since, as they add, “all’oratorio l’euro non c’è e i prezzi sono fermi al settantatré” (at the oratory there is no Euro, the prices are fixed in 1973). Elio e le storie tese, “Oratorium,” (2004). Web. Accessed 29 August 2017. <http://elioelestoriatese.it/canzoni/oratorium/>.

⁷³ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 198. “be they informed [...] of the needs of many of their peers who are poor and less fortunate. We will make of them ready and generous collaborators, driven by the enthusiasm of which only the youth who was raised Christian is capable.”

⁷⁴ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 156.

⁷⁵ *Atti del Capitolo Generale XIII dell’Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice* (Torino: Scuola tipografica privata Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1958?) 303-304.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Giussani, *Una scuola di vita*, 110.

⁷⁷ Schenal in discussion with the author.

Furthermore, many recalled specific nuns for their special skills in teaching, singing, embroidering, or creating costumes from nothing. The oratory was the place where many young women learned to embroider and sew (See Fig. 5). Anna would attend the oratory in the evening after work, and she mastered the skills of sewing.⁷⁸ Antonietta learned tatting, or “chiacchierino”; she would also help a sister to place the corporal on the altar and on the balustrade where people would receive the sacrament.⁷⁹ Suor Paola in the oratory in Bresso (Milan) would teach the older girls “a fare il pizzo di Cantù con il tombolo e i rocchetti” (bobbin lace making).⁸⁰ The sisters regularly offered courses on “economia domestica” (home economics) to promote the necessary skills for the future handling of a family.⁸¹



Fig. 5: Sewing class in the oratory of Villaggio Prealpino (BS), early 1960s. First published in *Bresciaoggi*, 05/10/2014, page 20.

Other nuns provided individual tutoring to those who could not attend state schools. Until the institution of the *scuola media unica* in the early 1960s, many girls from lower socio-economic classes finished all formal education after five years of elementary school. Not few, after having completed some sort of apprenticeship as a seamstress, would look for full-time work at age fourteen. The same Anna mentioned above went to work at age 11 in a toothpick factory undocumented. At 14, when she was officially allowed to work, she found employment in a textile factory in a nearby town. The Salesian nun in charge of the village oratory, however, recognised her good will and began to tutor her in the program of the *scuole commerciali*.⁸² In fact, to this day, many women are grateful for the learning opportunities that the oratory did offer them, through theater, catechism, sewing courses, or individual tutoring.

The image of the young priest kicking a football with the boys has been immortalised in many Italian novels, films, and TV programs. Yet nuns in the 1940s and 50s were not as keen to become involved in organised team sports. Although games such as dodgeball, paddleball, skipping rope, and gymnastics seemed to have been popular in the postwar years among the girls, none of the women I interviewed talked about actual organised sports being played in their oratory.⁸³ Some of their parents, however, lamented that their daughters would run around so much in the oratory that they would too quickly wear out their shoes.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Villa in discussion with the author.

⁷⁹ Carcatella in discussion with the author.

⁸⁰ Giussani, *Una scuola di vita*, 110.

⁸¹ Ironically, some mothers complained that the older girls, who were expected to help around the home, with the excuse of attending the oratory would not finish their chores (*Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 58).

⁸² Villa in discussion with the author.

⁸³ Comments included in the acts of the 1953 FMA General Council regarding the teaching of physical education in the Salesian schools may shed light on the lack of organised physical activities in Salesian oratories for girls in the

Summer activities would be particularly important for those girls who did not have the opportunity to go on vacation. During the summer months, the oratory nuns would sometimes take groups of young women on day trips to the lakes, the mountains, and the sanctuaries (See Fig. 6). For many, it was the only time they left their villages. “Col pullman o col treno si andava su verso Varese, fino al Sacro Monte...piccole gite così” (we took the train or the bus up to Varese, all the way to Sacro Monte...small excursions like that), remembers Annamaria who grew up in Jerago (Varese). “Le gite che ho fatto nella gioventù le ho fatte tutte con le suore...si andava in montagna, al lago...una bellissima gioventù!” (The excursions I went on in my youth were all with the sisters... we’d go to the mountain, the lake... a beautiful youth!).⁸⁵ Nazarena remembers day trips on snow fields from Bresso (Milan): “ci divertimmo tantissimo con le slitte, capitombolando spesso sulle discese ripide [...] E sul pullman, dopo l’alzata alle 5 del mattino, si cantava, si rideva, si schiamazzava e si recitava il Rosario!” (we had so much fun with the sleds, often riding down steep descents [...] and on the bus, after waking up at 5 in the morning, we sang, laughed, we were loud, and we prayed the rosary!).⁸⁶ Smaller, unauthorised outings, however, would occur from time to time as well, usually on the way to the oratory or when rehearsal was unexpectedly cancelled: “qualche volta facevamo la ‘scappatella’ che consisteva nel fare un giro sulla strada provinciale a suonare i campanelli” (sometimes we would do the ‘scappatella,’ which consisted in going around the main road ringing doorbells), remembered Angela.⁸⁷



Fig. 6: Young women from the oratory of Cassago (LC) on a trip to Lake Como, 1960s. Courtesy of Associazione Storico-Culturale S. Agostino, Cassago Brianza.

postwar years. Gymnastics, it is suggested, could potentially be a source of danger, as it may engage young women away from their homes, may cause them to lose their dignity by forcing them into physical positions “tollerabili solo per l’altro sesso” (tolerable only to the other sex), may play on their vanity by inviting them to exhibit themselves, and may encourage “uno smodato culto delle forze fisiche a contrasto con il dolce impero dell’amore e della virtù di riserbo” (an excessive cult of physical force, in contrast with the sweet realm of love and the virtue of discretion). The goal was not to eliminate physical education altogether, the text continued, but to avoid attracting attention to individual girls’ or young women’s bodies. The final recommendation was to have capable Salesian sisters as P. E. teachers, in order to educate “fanciulle robuste e dignitose, le quali sapranno, per virtù, rinnegare il piacere di comparire per essere fedeli custodi del focolare domestico e del proprio riserbo” (strong and dignified young girls, who will know, through virtue, to repudiate the pleasure of appearance in order to become faithful custodians of the home and their own modesty). *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, 252.

A few years later, the General Council recognised the all-pervasive interest in sports even among young women, and recommended that oratory assistants give “parvenza di sport” (a semblance of sports) to the usual games “di pretta marca salesiana” (of a true salesian character) in order to keep the oratorians interested. They also recognised, however, that organised games could be a “palestra di obbedienza, di grazia, di discendenza, di condiscendenza, di disciplina” (a training ground for obedience, compliance, grace, and discipline). *Atti del Capitolo Generale XIII*, 340-341.

⁸⁴ Carcatella in discussion with the author.

⁸⁵ Aliverti in discussion with the author.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Giussani *Una scuola di vita*, 110.

⁸⁷ Puricelli in discussion with the author.

“Non c’era altro,” summarizes Lina. “Non c’erano società sportive. Non c’erano scuole di musica [...] All’oratorio noi imparavamo a cantare, a ballare, a recitare, a ricamare... di tutto: noi si imparava all’oratorio” (There was nothing else [...] There were no sports associations. There were no music schools [...] In the oratory we learned to dance, sing, recite, embroider... everything: we learned in the oratory).⁸⁸

The ‘Transgressive Girls’

The women I interviewed who lived in villages during their youth agreed that, in general, parents expected their daughters to attend the oratory, which they usually did happily because they would find their circle of friends there. They also added that in the villages themselves there would be no other recreational opportunities. The alternative would have been to take public transport to the nearest town in order to walk in the public park or go to the movies. Of course, by doing so, one ran the risk of being seen and reported to their parents. According to Annamaria, “All’epoca non si andava in giro come adesso, anche perché abitando in un paese e conoscendoci tutti, non si poteva scappare. [...] E poi, se io per caso non fossi andata all’oratorio, al momento di tornare a casa mio papà avrebbe già saputo dove ero stata!”⁸⁹

In Vanzaghello, the girls even had an attendance card which the parish priest would stamp each week, thus making it easier to detect absences. The same parish priest refused to ring the wedding bells for those girls who did not attend the oratory. Thus, some young women would join only when they knew they were going to get married.⁹⁰ However, the number of those girls who did not attend the oratory at all—those labelled “le trasgressive fra virgolette” (the so-called transgressive girls)—was very limited.⁹¹

The situation in the cities was different. Rosetta reports that there were definitely young women in Brescia who did not attend the oratory and would go to the movies instead.⁹² A Salesian sister commented on those young women “che tornano inappuntabili da ritrovi mondani o da passeggiate ambigue” (who returned, impeccable, from frivolous encounters and mysterious strolls) on a Sunday evening, while the oratorians arrived home “forse sudate e un po’ sporche” (maybe sweaty and a little dirty) but with peace in their hearts.⁹³ Some larger urban centers also offered young women the opportunity to enrol in lay associations, such as the Associazione Pionieri d’Italia or the Associazione Ragazze Italiane which, however, never reached the same level of popularity as the oratories.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Schenal in discussion with the author.

⁸⁹ Aliverti in discussion with the author. “Back then you wouldn’t go around as you do now, also because living in a town where everybody knew each other, you couldn’t escape. [...] And then, if by any chance I didn’t show up at the oratory, upon returning home my dad would already know where I had been!”

⁹⁰ In a story reminiscent of the legendary rivalry between Don Camillo and Peppone, Flavia reported that she attended the wedding of a relative who had not gone to the oratory because her father was a communist. As revenge for not having the wedding bells rung, during the ceremony the father put on some very loud music from the communist party office. The priest was not impressed. Flavia Banda in discussion with the author, 30 May 2013.

⁹¹ Banda in discussion with the author.

⁹² Ragazzi in discussion with the author.

⁹³ Suor M. M. – FMA, “L’Oratorio Femminile non ha fatto il suo tempo,” *Eco degli oratori* 11 November 1959, 390.

⁹⁴ On the Associazione Pionieri d’Italia, see Michela Marchioro, “Nascita e sviluppo.” Centro di documentazione e ricerca Carlo Pagliarini. n. d. Accessed 20 September 2014. <http://www.carlopagliarini.it/database/archivio/pagliarini/archiviopagliarini.nsf/Pagine/5ADF9D3D214ACF8CC12570D5005F4305?OpenDocument>.

The Associazione Ragazze d’Italia (or Ragazze Italiane), active in the early 1950s, was connected with the Unione Donne Italiane. It receives but a brief mention in Patrizia Gabrielli’s book on UDI between 1944 and 1955. Patrizia Gabrielli, *La pace e la mimosa. L’Unione donne italiane e la costruzione politica della memoria (1944-1955)* (Roma: Donzelli, 2005), 36.

Little Women Grow Up

Most girls attended the oratory from a very young age until they married, usually in their early 20s (See Fig. 7).⁹⁵ Antonietta, for example, attended her oratory from 1943 to 1963.⁹⁶ Letizia from Orzinuovi (Brescia), who never did marry, attended the oratory until she was 35.⁹⁷ Anna, who married in 1956, aged 22, wished she did not have to leave:

Mia suocera era del 1890 e per lei quando una ragazza si sposava, doveva dedicarsi solo alla famiglia e al marito e non all'oratorio. Per me è stata una mazzata perché figli ancora non ne avevo e mi piaceva andare all'oratorio. Allora a volte andavo senza dirlo! Poi però con rammarico ho dovuto lasciare.⁹⁸



Fig. 7: Young women in the courtyard of the oratory of Concorezzo (MB), early 1950s. Courtesy of the Archivio Storico della Città di Concorezzo.

As they became older, teenagers were often given greater responsibilities for the oratory activities. The *Regole per le giovani dell'Oratorio* for the church of Saints Nazario and Celso in Brescia, for example, stated that, while the direction of the oratory was left to the nuns, “si sceglieranno tra le giovani componenti l'oratorio alcune di maggiore età, e che si distinguono per senno, e per vera pietà, e a queste sarà dato l'incarico di assistenti o di sorvegliatrici” (among the young women of the oratory, some will be chosen who are of age and who stand out for their good judgment and true piety, and these will be assigned as assistants and supervisors).⁹⁹ Maria, at just 15, was asked to teach catechism to the younger girls.¹⁰⁰ Older girls were sometimes in charge of the candy counter. They were also assigned the main roles in the plays (while the younger girls would begin their dramatic career wearing cardboard angel wings but reciting no lines) and would often be in charge of creating or obtaining their own costumes.¹⁰¹ Finally, older oratorians could sign up for the Catholic organization *Azione Cattolica*, where they would have

⁹⁵ Girls as young as seven could sign up for the oratory of the church of SS. Nazario and Celso in Brescia. “Regole per le giovani.”

⁹⁶ Carcatella in discussion with the author.

⁹⁷ Letizia Falava in discussion with the author, 14 January 2014.

⁹⁸ Villa in discussion with the author. “My mother in law was born in 1890, and, for her, when a girl got married, she had to attend only to her family and her husband and forget about the oratory. This was a blow for me because I didn't have any children yet and I liked going to the oratory. So sometimes I went without telling anyone! But then with regret I had to stop.”

⁹⁹ “Regole per le giovani.”

¹⁰⁰ Sandias in discussion with the author.

¹⁰¹ In cases of historical dramas, or whenever something different from their everyday clothes was called for, the older girls would often have to ask wealthy villagers to borrow special clothes and even furniture, carpets, and decorations.

special meetings, help out with the singing at masses and sometimes participate in spiritual retreats. The ones who did not have family commitments would often take up positions of leadership within Azione Cattolica as well.¹⁰²

Very often the young women who grew up attending the oratory continued their involvement as married women by helping out and sending to the oratory their own children. As Annamaria summarizes: “è proprio il fondamento dell’oratorio di Don Bosco: formare i ragazzi ma anche le famiglie. La collaborazione è grande. Chi arriva da questi oratori, vuole continuare. E chi arriva da altre realtà, si accorge della differenza” (that’s truly the foundation of Don Bosco’s oratory: to educate young people but also families. Collaboration is important. Those who come to these oratories want to continue. And whoever comes from different circumstances notices the difference).¹⁰³

The Most Beautiful Years

There is an inevitable touch of nostalgia which emerges when people in their senior years reminisce about their youth. It is probable that the labelling of the oratory years as “gli anni più belli” (the most beautiful years), which many of my interviewees shared, may also be tinged with the very human longing for one’s more youthful, carefree, and joyful self. Having said that, the women I met stressed not only how enjoyable their youthful time in the oratory in the postwar years had been, but also the significant difference it made in their lives. The oratory made them feel more self-confident, able to socialize, aware of the importance of spirituality, attentive to the needs of others, ready to volunteer, possessed of a lasting love for the arts, and supported by a strong community of friends. As Angela Bertero has stated, the oratory established “il diritto per le ragazze al gioco, al tempo libero e all’interiorità” (young girls’ rights to play, free time, and interiority) and also constituted “un modo per aiutare le giovani a essere protagoniste della propria ed altrui crescita” (a way of helping young women to be the protagonists of their own development and that of others).¹⁰⁴



Fig. 8: The girls, young women and nuns of the oratory of Concorezzo (BS), 1950s. Courtesy of the Archivio Storico della Citta' di Concorezzo.

¹⁰² See Luciano Caimi, “L’educazione agli ideali democratici negli anni della ricostruzione nazionale. Il contributo delle associazioni giovanili di Azione Cattolica,” in *Educazione alla democrazia tra passato e presente*, edited by Michele Corsi and Roberto Sani (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2004), 87-123 on Azione Cattolica’s activities in the post-war years.

¹⁰³ Aliverti in discussion with the author.

¹⁰⁴ Bertero, “Don Bosco, le sue suore” 286-287.

Discussing the Catholic women's associations of the postwar years, Luciano Caimi makes several observations which, I believe, are also applicable to the environment of the *oratorio femminile*:

l'associazionismo femminile del primo quindicennio post-bellico [...] quantunque conservasse una visione prevalentemente tradizionale della giovane, nondimeno, favorì, seppure con gradazioni diverse, l'apertura socio-culturale delle aderenti, mostrando, nel medesimo tempo, attenzione ai loro problemi concreti, compresi quelli della vita affettiva e socio-professionale. Il gruppo ecclesiale, non la famiglia e la scuola, costituì, per molte ragazze del tempo, luogo di maturazione vocazionale, di affinamento delle responsabilità civili, di preparazione all'esperienza coniugale.¹⁰⁵

There is no doubt that all-girl oratories kept to a “visione prevalentemente tradizionale” (a mainly traditional vision) of the girls and young women who attended them, directing them mostly toward a future of marriage and motherhood.¹⁰⁶ Yet, it is also true that they supported them in their growth in ways that family, school, and employment were not able to do so. Today, we are used to considering the church as one of the obstacles to women's liberation, Lucetta Scaraffia states.¹⁰⁷ However, one should not forget that, traditionally, it was within Christianity that women had the opportunity to study and express themselves: “L'influenza Cristiana è stata più vasta, più profonda e più favorevole alle donne di quello che possiamo giudicare se guardiamo solo alla Chiesa in quanto tale” (the Christian influence has been larger, more profound, and more favorable to women than we can judge if we just look at the Church as such), she claims.¹⁰⁸ Through postwar oratories, the Catholic Church meant to safeguard the physical and spiritual well-being of girls and young women in an age that saw rapid societal change; it meant to keep them safe and chaste and make of them good wives and mothers. But the oratory experience for the women who lived it was not only protective; it was also liberating. The oratory, in fact, gave them the freedom to play, pray, sing, act, lead, learn, socialise, volunteer—in a word, to grow in age, wisdom, and confidence in a supportive all-female environment. The women I interviewed, who used to be girls and young women in the postwar years, were invariably grateful for the experience of the *oratorio femminile*. Even if their memory might be tinged with a bit of nostalgia, they all agreed that attending their local Catholic youth center while growing up has given them the skills, education, development, and sense of community to face the challenges of their adult life.

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¹⁰⁵ Caimi, “La questione giovanile.” “women's associations of the first fifteen years after the war [...] as much as they held a mainly traditional view of young women, they nonetheless favored, even if to varying degrees, the cultural and social development of those who attended them, showing, at the same time, a preoccupation for their concrete problems, including those concerning their sentimental and socio-professional lives. The religious group, not the family or school, constituted, for many young women of the time, a place of vocational growth, of improvement of social skills, and of preparation for marriage.”

¹⁰⁶ Oratories also fostered many vocations to consecrated life. See for example Giussani, *Una scuola di vita*, 73-99, on the vocations born within the all-girl oratory in Bresso (Milan).

¹⁰⁷ Lucetta Scaraffia, *Dall'ultimo banco. La Chiesa, le donne, il sinodo* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori. 2016), 27.

¹⁰⁸ Scaraffia, *Dall'ultimo banco*, 41.

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